STATEMENT OF DANNY D. SELLS
BEFORE THE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss watershed activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), specifically the Small Watershed Program authorized by P.L. 83-566 and P.L. 78-534. The Small Watershed Program serves thousands of communities across the country, improving the natural resource base, preventing floods, and increasing economic development. We at NRCS are proud of what the watershed program has accomplished over the past five decades. In my remarks today, I would like to underscore the importance of the program, and our ongoing work in comprehensive natural resource conservation on a watershed basis.

The NRCS watershed protection and flood prevention program is the first and only national effort that helps local organizations plan and install small watershed-based projects on private lands. Through the program, NRCS provides technical expertise, watershed planning, and financial assistance for local units of government. It provides a process to solve local natural resource problems and avoid unnecessary regulation; empowers local decision-makers; builds partnerships; and encourages local entities and States to fund and own these facilities.

The Small Watershed Program embodies the principles of locally-led conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts. Local steering committees develop plans for the projects and help establish objectives and priorities. Also, local sponsors secure necessary land rights, secure federal, state and local permits, pay a share of construction costs, and assume responsibility for maintenance. NRCS, in addition to providing financial assistance, serves as a technical advisor, bringing science and technology, and knowledge about the resource base and ecosystem of the watershed.

One such project, before the Committee for authorization is the Middle Deep Red Run Watershed Plan for southwestern Oklahoma. The project is located in Tillman, Comanche, and Kiowa counties. The Middle Deep Red Run Creek Watershed has a drainage area of 186,000 acres. The watershed plan consists of nine floodwater retarding structures, one multi-purpose structure, and associated fish and wildlife mitigation measures. The plan enhances wetland and fish and wildlife resources, and provides a water supply, water storage, and flood protection for the Hackberry Flat Wetland Restoration Area. The ten structures will act in concert to protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources. The total cost of the project is $11.4 million, of which the federal share is $9.5 million.

If the Middle Deep Red Run Watershed Plan is implemented, it will provide environmental, economic, and social benefits for southwest Oklahoma that are typical of NRCS Small Watershed Program. In total, we estimate that the Small Watershed Program yields annual benefits of $800

million, but it would be impossible to capture fully what these watershed projects mean to communities across the nation. The dams and other structures protect towns, factories, schools and housing. Farms depend upon them for irrigation; the recreation they provide enhances local economies; and they enhance the quality of life for local residents. Communities have responded enthusiastically to the program; as a result, we have a backlog of over $1.5 billion in requests for financial and technical assistance.

In 1996, NRCS initiated a major effort to review the watershed program to develop a strategy for the future. In April 1998, we released a "Strategy for the 21st Century" report. Some of the actions recommended were:

- Prioritize implementation, based upon net environmental, social, and economic benefits.
- Strengthen technical capacity of NRCS and other program participants through increased coordination, planning, and training.
- Leverage financial resources.

NRCS is now considering ways to facilitate these actions and improve the Small Watershed Program.

Fiscal year 1998 (FY98) funding for P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566 was $101,036,000; the FY99 funding level is $99,443,000; and the FY00 request is $83,423,000. Under the proposed funding levels, most states will receive funds for scheduled phases of their top priority projects. However, only approximately 60-70 construction/installation elements under the Small Watershed Program will be funded.

Aging Infrastructure

The funding request for FY00 also includes dedicating $1 million to educate the public, including project sponsors, about the condition of the aging infrastructure installed under our watershed programs.

Since 1948, NRCS and local sponsors have built over 10,400 small watershed dams. Many of these structures are now reaching the end of their design life and, unless rehabilitated, may pose significant threats to human health, safety, and to the environment. The deterioration of these structures threatens to affect adversely the estimated $8.5 billion infrastructure of flood control, rural water supplies, conservation of natural resources and economic support established through these projects.

In addition, many highways and bridges are designed based on present downstream flow rates associated with these projects. That is to say, the integrity and viability of some of the nation’s transportation infrastructure depends upon Small Watershed Projects. The human toll and economic effect from a failure could be devastating.

In a survey just completed by NRCS, the agency identified over 2200 dams that need immediate

rehabilitation, at an estimated cost of $543 million based upon our preliminary surveys. The need could be much greater as the number of structures reaching their design life increases dramatically in the coming two decades. Whereas fifty dams have already reached the end of their design life, over 1300 dams will reach their design life by the year 2009. Because these structures are owned by local communities, NRCS is not legally responsible for their restoration; however, NRCS officials believe it is imperative that we inform communities now about the safety and stability of the structures, and the potential consequences of failures.

"The Small Watershed Program Strategy for the 21st Century" report also recommended dealing with the issue of the aging watershed infrastructure by:

- Supporting state funding initiatives to meet state dam safety requirements and increasing maintenance needs and

- Supporting comprehensive planning in completed watersheds to address public health and safety needs as well as to enhance other resources not addressed in the original projects.

Meeting the remedial needs of aging watersheds will be a significant task, especially since circumstances surrounding many of these projects have changed. The population of many communities has grown, land-use has changed, and environmental laws have been enacted and changed. However, continued deterioration of the projects constructed will have a major negative effect on economic and living conditions in rural America. Without action to sustain the systems by local sponsors, the magnitude of the problem will increase as the infrastructure continues to age.

The Administration acknowledges that dam safety is a growing problem and is committed to working with Congress and the relevant state and Federal agencies to find a way to best address the issue. However, the Administration has some concerns with H.R. 728 as currently drafted. For example, this bill raises important questions that need to be discussed regarding the shared responsibility for dam safety between Federal, state, and local entities. In addition, the bill specifies that cost-benefit analysis for rehabilitation proposals shall not be done, despite the fact that such analysis, along with the required NEPA process, could provide the best way to examine these proposals. Both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation carry out a cost-benefit analysis before doing any rehabilitation of their dams. We are concerned about the amount of resources that will be needed to undertake this effort, and believe that funding for rehabilitation should not come at the expense of other ongoing activities. We look forward to working with you on this issue.

I would like to take this opportunity to point out that none of the work we have accomplished, nor the challenges we face can be met without the expertise, hard work and dedication of the NRCS field delivery system, including conservation districts, Resource Conservation and Development councils and state agency partners. Aside from work associated with the Small Watershed Program, NRCS provides assistance through its basic service to private landowners that directly relate to and benefit watersheds. Through the watershed surveys and planning program, NRCS works with local sponsoring organizations to develop plans on watersheds dealing with water quality, flooding, water and land management, and sedimentation problems. These plans then form the basis for installing needed works of improvement. The agency also works cooperatively with State and local governments to develop river basin surveys and floodplain management studies to help identify water

and related land resource problems and evaluate sound solutions. For FY00, we have asked Congress to appropriate for watershed surveys and planning $11.7 million, an increase of $1.4 million over the FY99 appropriated level.

We have had many significant accomplishments in the Small Watershed Program over the past five decades and many parts of America are better off as a result. But there is still much more to do. We will continue to inform communities about the status and structural integrity of the existing projects. We will continue to work with local communities to recommend the best-planned watershed projects that our science and technology can develop and will continue to prioritize and evaluate our activities so that the financial and technical resources available can be placed where they are needed most.

I thank the Subcommittee and would be happy to take any questions that you might have.